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ABSTRACT

Self-help education and self-help literature is important in the lives of African American adults, but the basic models of learning, development, and program planning in adult education have often been developed with little concern for the unique needs of African Americans. In addition, current theories of adult learning often lack understanding of culture and the role that race, economics, and gender play in the learning transaction. For example, some critics argue that three of the main theories of adult education--andragogy, self-directed learning, and perspective transformation--focus heavily on the individual and do not recognize the value of groups, as an Africentric perspective would. An Africentric perspective should be considered in developing models for learning and development. Africentric books present sensitive issues and point out those hidden barriers that only other African Americans who have experienced them first hand would know. The emphasis on self-actualization or student-centered learning has been the mainstay of the African American community; from the days of slavery, African Americans have had to develop coping skills just to stay alive. Self-help and adult education are models exemplified by such men as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Dubois. Given the need for self-help education in the lives of African Americans, adult educators can conduct research to discover the applicability of the mainstream models of self-help for African Americans and learn to use new Africentric models. (Contains 15 references.) (KC)

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by Michael L. Rowland

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African Americans and Self-Help Education: The Missing Link in Adult Education

Mainstream literature on adult development examines the unique life changes of adults using the theoretical models of Maslow, Rogers, Levinson, Sheehy, and Belenky et al., to name a few. Yet, as Ross-Gordon (1991) has emphasized, there is a need for a multicultural perspective in adult education research. She states, "If we are to truly listen to learners representing multicultural perspectives we must be open to looking at the world from their perspectives" (p. 10). In this Digest, I assert that a multicultural approach to adult education and self-help must include a review of literature that examines self-help education and its impact on African Americans' learning and development. An approach to adult learning that integrates the various dimensions of the lives of African American learners must be researched for the future growth of the field of adult education.

Recently, African-American writers in the popular press and academicians (Eric Copage, Iyanla Vanzant, Dennis Kimbro, bell hooks) have focused their attention on issues of self-help and personal growth for African American adults, as evidenced by the growth in the number of books written in the genre of self-help and African American consumers' book-buying habits (Smikle 2000). The majority of African American consumers are women in their thirties and forties with higher education, who are in the work force and/or married with families. The types of self-help books these women buy most often include books on self-esteem, gender issues, or spiritual enlightenment, as well as biographies of well-known African Americans such as Maya Angelou or Oprah Winfrey, whose lives serve as inspiring models.

The purpose of this Digest is to recognize the significant role of the field of self-help education and self-help literature in the lives of African American adults and to pose the question, How can we expand the knowledge base and scope of self-help education for African Americans?

African Americans and Adult Learning

The basic models of learning, development, and program planning in adult education have often been developed with little concern for the unique needs of African Americans (Colin 1994). Current theories of adult learning have also been criticized for their lack of cultural understanding and the role that race, economics, and gender play in the learning transaction. For example, Flannery (1995) argues that three of the main theories of adult education—andragogy, self-directed learning, and perspective transformation—focus heavily on the individual and do not recognize the value of groups. She observes that some racial and ethnic groups, such as African Americans, place greater emphasis on "communal values." Flannery explains, "communal values include knowledge which is valued, how learning occurs, [and] communication patterns of working together for the good of the community" (pp. 153-154). Flannery contends that adult learning theories must be mindful of the influence of social, historical, and economic roles in adult education and "must acknowledge that people and cultures vary in how they learn" (p. 156). Theories "must become inclusive and give voice to all people and groups, allowing missing voices (women, working-class persons, persons of color) to narrate their diverse stories of how and where they learn, and about their values of learning" (p. 156).

If we look beyond some of the traditional models and formal approaches to learning, there are many ways to examine the learning needs and habits of African American adults. Any discussion of self-help for African Americans must include the interplay of race, economics, power, and education. This can be achieved through the Africentric perspective. As defined by Guy (1996), the Africentric perspective is a "culturally grounded philosophical perspective that reflects the intellectual traditions of both African and African American cultures. Africentrism is understood as an attempt to reclaim a sense of identity, community, and power in the face of Eurocentric cultural hegemony" (p. 21). Therefore, when focusing on the learning and development of African American adults, learning models that reflect the Africentric perspective should be considered (Colin 1994). Africentric learning models "focus on the development of the racial self and the bond between the individual and the racial group and the impact that racist interactions have on the development of the self-ethnic image" (Colin 1991, p. 58). Colin notes that the work of Cross (1971, 1978), DuBois ([1903] 1969), Parham (1989), and Thomas (1971) should be considered in developing models for learning and development.

Africentric books present issues and problems from the African American perspective. People who have been oppressed by the European / white perspective and who have come to believe the black stereotypes that have been projected onto them need the redefinition that Africentric books can offer them, because they are too closely identified with the stereotypes to be able to break out of them on their own. Africentric books present sensitive issues and point out those hidden barriers that only other African Americans who have experienced them first hand would know. In contrast, a general self-help book would simply discuss general rules for how to achieve something, without looking at the hidden barriers that create obstacles for blacks. Africentric self-help books are usually intended for blacks who want to have successful lives and professions in "white America," while still maintaining their African American identity. It is this focus on reinforcing one's multicultural identity, while also giving one the survival skills for "making it" in the mainstream, that distinguishes Africentric self-help books.

Today, one of the main philosophical ideologies of adult education programs has been the focus on the personal growth of the individual or what is often referred to as "self-actualization" or student-centered learning (Maslow 1968; Rogers 1961). Yet, given the African American experience, this is nothing new to African Americans. The concept of self-help, which became popular with the wave of New Age ideas, has been the mainstay of the African American community. From the days of slavery, African Americans have had to develop coping skills just to stay alive. At first, self-help for African America was embedded in the spirituals, sermons, faith communities, slave songs, and coded hymns that the white master could not understand. Self-help and adult education are part of the African American cultural heritage, as exemplified by such men as Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois.

Booker T. Washington believed that African Americans needed first to take care of their survival and safety needs and then worry about the more complex needs of belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization. Once the basic needs were met, then they could focus on economic independence, home and land ownership, and starting a business. The humanistic efforts of adult educators like Booker T. placed the personal needs of the learners first; learning for personal change was a secondary but essential characteristic of adult education. Washington advocated self-help within the race and engaged African Americans to pursue "industrial" education, which he felt would allow them to be more independent. At that point, they would

know how to position themselves strategically in the social, political, and economic structure of America. Denton (1993) asserts that today's adult education programs are in fact modeled after Washington's principles and his contribution to the field of adult education. Denton describes how Booker T. Washington's philosophy of adult education led the way for the mainstream white American writer Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The humanistic perspective on adult education, not only among African Americans but in general, may not have come about without the influence of men like Washington or DuBois.

W. E. B. DuBois believed in self-help for African Americans and understood the social dynamics that race played in America for blacks. DuBois's answer to the problems that confronted Black America was the power of education to transform the race, in contrast to Booker T.'s humanistic philosophy. DuBois was concerned with the activism that African Americans needed in order to gain social and political freedoms. In other words, he did not want to wait to meet survival needs first, but was more militant about the need to demand one's rights. He understood the interplay of race, economics, and education and the conflicting feelings many blacks had of being an American and being black. DuBois's self-help philosophy is therefore more aggressive than Booker T.'s. As with the work of Booker T., DuBois's book, ***The Souls of Black Folks*** (1903), can be regarded as one of the early books on self-help education in America because it promotes survival skills acquired through education.

Another example is Marcus Garvey's "self-ethnic reliance" model. Garvey insisted that African Americans rely on their own initiative, and he believed that "the only limitations they had were those that they placed on themselves…the effectiveness of white control and oppressive constraints was dependent upon whether [one] *believed* in the doctrine of racial inferiority and acted accordingly, and… their negative self-ethnic image and fatalistic attitude were not due to a state of being ordained by God" (Colin 1996, p. 54). Colin argues that we need to consider all previous models when planning new approaches for African Americans.

Conclusion and Recommendations

If self-help efforts continue to be important to African American adults and to adult education, we must study the ways in which African American adults pursue learning that facilitates personal growth and self-help and can lead to self-actualization. Given the strong need for self-help education in the lives of African Americans, adult education cannot continue to ignore this area of adult development and learning in America. Adult educators can contribute to and enhance the area of self-help education by exploring essential questions and assisting adults in critically selecting and analyzing self-help literature to maximize their learning experiences using these books as a resource.

Questions such as the following could be explored: What is the basic educational philosophy of self-help and inspirational literature aimed at African Americans? Can reading this type of literature and engaging in this type of self-education lead to greater self-awareness, personal growth, or personal development? Can self-help books provide or provoke praxis (reflection and action) in order to assist African American adults understand themselves better? What impact does low self-esteem have on self-help education? Why has adult education neglected the area of self-help education?

Research is needed to discover the applicability of the mainstream models of self-help for African Americans. Such research can identify the areas where mainstream models are lacking. Although self-help by definition is all about the individual, adult education can promote social action as well. The African American community can benefit from collective efforts at self-help. Research can also be done to distinguish valuable self-help literature, based on researched data, versus poorly researched and poorly written books that can mislead and may even harm the reader. Such research can identify the helpful literature we can incorporate into the classroom for African American adult education. Adult educators can also research where the fine line is between (1) counseling learners on their lives and (2) letting learners evaluate the concepts in a self-help book for themselves—the goal being to sharpen their analytical and critical thinking skills and not necessarily to "fix" their lives for them.

As the self-help literature and mentality pervades every area of society, it is important for adult educators to understand this phenomenon and how it affects adult growth and development. This is especially critical, as it may provide additional information about adult development, growth, and learning processes for African Americans. Adult education focuses on three learning theories based on an adult's characteristics, life situations, and consciousness raising (Merriam 1987). Adult education for African Americans must address these in light of Africentrism. Adult educators can incorporate adult self-help literature in their programs and classes. Adult educators can also offer new, Africentric models based specifically on ethnic identity or gender identity. Other ethnic self-help models, such as those of immigrants to America, can also be used to establish new strategies for adult education for African Americans.

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